

Australian workers denounce new industrial laws

Our correspondents
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A broad range of industrial and office workers, state and federal public servants, bank employees, teachers, self-employed workers, pensioners and students spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth yesterday during the mass demonstrations against the new industrial relations laws. (See “Australia: 500,000 workers demonstrate against Howard’s industrial legislation”)

Many recognised that the Howard government’s legislation and the new anti-terror laws were related, and part of an international assault on working people. They pointed to the consequences for jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights. Several immigrant workers drew parallels with their experiences in other countries.

Few of those attending had any illusions that Labor would fight Howard’s industrial legislation and most of those we interviewed angrily criticised Labor for supporting the anti-terror measures. When asked to elaborate on their attitude to Labor, disappointment, anger and disgust were the most common sentiments.

Comments by **Amanda Walsh**, a nurse, who attended the Sydney rally, were typical. She said she was opposed to everything the Howard government stood for.

“I am against him dragging us into the war on Iraq. This war is illegal and a crime and was always about oil and profits for big companies, and the new IR [Industrial Relations] laws are the same. They are aimed at getting rid of workers’ conditions to make more profits for employers. I am concerned about my conditions and those of all workers.”

Asked what she thought about Labor’s support for Howard’s anti-terror laws, she replied: “I am really disgusted that Labor supported this and it raises questions about their opposition to the IR laws. Howard can’t be trusted on anything. He has lied continually about everything, so why trust him on this? The anti-terror laws are not about security for people. If Howard were really concerned about security, he would not have joined the war on Iraq. It is clear that this has increased the likelihood of a terror attack here. I don’t have any confidence in Labor. I don’t see it as an opposition.”

Elizabeth, who also attended the Sydney demonstration, said: “I believe we have to fight these new laws. They are aimed at taking away the rights and conditions of workers that our parents and our grandparents fought to achieve. I believe that this rally is the beginning of a fight against them. Having been a Labor person all my life I must say I am disappointed in the party’s performance. I am disillusioned with Labor. They are certainly not doing much to support workers and their families”.

Perry, a library assistant from Edith Cowan University in Perth said: “I think what Howard is doing is a turning point in industrial relations in Australia and a step backwards. We need to fight for the rights of workers against the globalisation push and the power of the corporate world in politics. I don’t think the ALP represents a genuine left position anymore. It’s hard to find politicians who will draw a line in the sand.

“The war on terror is to some extent a red herring, in the sense that it demonises an enemy in order to distract the people from the real issues.

The whole idea of a war on terror is misleading. One person’s freedom fighter is another’s enemy. It’s not a black-and-white world—there are shades in between. The politicians want to push us into this black-and-white world. It insults people’s intelligence. The sedition laws have to be opposed. Kim Beazley has sold out.”

Cameron Usher, a member of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), told WSWs reporters in Melbourne that the industrial relations laws were “divisive”.

“Howard is developing an underclass of the working poor, where workers are trapped in a poverty cycle and where real wages are continually diminished.

“The anti-terror legislation is related to all of this. We could see any group attacked: community groups, unions and workers. The Howard government is so business-focused that even opposition to the IR legislation could be said to be subverting the national economy. Any group opposing government policy can be targeted.

“I like to think that this couldn’t happen here, but the government is changing society. The recent raids in Sydney and Melbourne are to create fear. Look back to what Howard did with the Tampa, then the children overboard, and now the recent raids. Every new threat is to whip up public fear.

“Days like this are important to express widespread opposition but my union, the CPSU, did not call a strike. They recommended that we take approved leave. I don’t believe that the Labor Party will repeal the IR legislation if elected. I am increasingly disillusioned with Labor. They are more compliant than ever with Howard’s changes. Hopefully, Labor will take note of the numbers here today and maybe change, but they are increasingly out of touch with their constituency.”

Philip Johnson, a self-employed electrical engineer, attended the Melbourne rally with his wife Alyson. “We are concerned about the impact on lower-paid and lower-skilled workers,” he said. “They will have no negotiation powers or collective bargaining.”

“The trend of this government is to restrict freedom—for the government to have more and more control. The sedition laws in the anti-terror legislation restrict everyone’s rights to protest when governments are making immoral decisions. Back in the Vietnam War days we protested against Australia’s involvement. If you want to protest against the Iraq War, then this could now be classed as aiding the enemy.

“The Labor Party is a weak reflection of the Liberals. There is no genuine opposition. No-one is saying anything different.”

One factory worker at the Melbourne rally, who wanted to remain anonymous, commented: “There is no choice under the IR legislation and the anti-terrorist legislation has such a broad framework. I was born in South Africa and under apartheid, if you were black, you were regarded as a terrorist. Now living in Australia, it is like déjà vu. What applied over there now applies here. I don’t think the Labor Party would improve anything. With Beazley, there will be no roll back. You can’t count on that.”

Stewart, a young building worker, said: “We have to take on Howard on this IR stuff because they are cutting the throats of the working class. The anti-terror laws are like what is happening in the construction industry with the Building Industry Taskforce.

“The Taskforce says that if you have not got written permission from your employer to attend today’s rally, then you could be fined \$22,000 or \$110,000 for a union. Workers can be called before the Taskforce and you have no right to silence. It’s about breaking the building unions.

“The Taskforce legislation came through in October and now any stoppages or work bans for health and safety issues are banned. We have to fight against all of this.”

Ben Hay, a Melbourne public servant, said: “I think there is a worrying trend around the world at the moment of a much more rightwing agenda and it’s being led by Bush and Blair. Blair’s supposed to be a Labour person, but with Bush they have moved politics to the far right.

“We are losing rights that have been part of our democratic process for about a hundred years. The industrial relations laws are as undemocratic as many of the things in the anti-terror legislation. I’m really concerned that this is the thin edge of the wedge and will stop us being able to express our own opinions, particularly against policies of the government.

“I’m pretty disillusioned with the Labor Party,” he continued. “It lacks leadership and I think that they’re afraid to speak for the working class because they feel the middle class voters won’t vote for them. They may as well join the Liberals.”

Juan Fernandez, a self-employed painter, said: “The IR legislation won’t affect me directly as I work for myself but I want to see an opposition. The ALP doesn’t represent working people at all and is led by the right wing. Whatever Howard comes up with, Beazley agrees with it. He supported the Iraq war straight away. The Labor Party is in decline and there is no opposition to Howard in parliament.

“I came to Australia two years after the coup in Chile. Here in Australia, the poor exist, but they are hidden. In Chile they are out in the open. There are shantytowns and beggars. You can’t live on the minimum wage.”

A teacher from Footscray City Primary School said: “About 50 percent of the workforce at my school left today to come out on strike. What they are doing with education is connected with their anti-democratic agenda. As they have cut education, the younger generation has been increasingly dumb-founded by what is happening and confused about the information disseminated by the media.

“There are no leaders standing up against the new IR and anti-terrorist agenda. At the same time, ordinary people feel completely disenfranchised, as their politicians just go ahead with their own agenda.

“I really think we need a new party—a new organisation that links working people around the world. Look at where my wife comes from, the Philippines. If you want to talk about an anti-democratic regime, you’ve got it there. People have no right to strike or to organise or to oppose anything the government advances. This is what is coming here. There are real similarities and people have to wake up. You can’t look at what’s happening here without looking at what is happening to working people around the world.”

Jeff Webster, a teacher, and his wife **Heather**, traveled 300 kilometres from Wilson’s Promontory to attend the rally. “The government is changing all our rights and there is a lot of fear in the community,” Jeff said.

“People are concerned, but if we weren’t in Iraq we wouldn’t have this situation. It’s snowballing in so many different areas but a lot of people have no comprehension of how bad it is. Look at the sedition laws. They don’t want an informed opposition. In the present climate, you have to be concerned. I’ve been a Labor voter all my life, but I’ve lost faith in the Labor Party. I’m frustrated.”

Heather Webster was much blunter. “Kim Beazley is a waste of space,” she said.

As well as tens of thousands of workers, numbers of university and high school students attended the nationwide rallies.

Rosie, a first-year International Studies student at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, said: “I came in with my dad because this legislation affects the entire community. It will lessen workers’ rights and make it much harder for them to organise.

“The terror laws are there to encourage fear in the population. It is aimed at suppressing the population and I think the ALP is complicit in all of this. They just go along with anything promoted by Howard. They are weak in the extreme.

“It is part of a movement to the right by governments across the world,” she added. “Australia is following both Britain and the US. The ‘Coalition of the Willing’ isn’t a coalition of the populations, it is a coalition of the governments. And these governments are subject to companies that have far greater power than governments. The market operates outside all controls.”

Simon, a Year 8 student from University High in Melbourne, attended the rally with others from his school. “I don’t know a lot about what is happening,” he said, “but I realise that the workers are getting the short end of the stick. It’s really good to see so many people at the rally today.

“I know that Howard said all this will be forgotten in a few months but how can we believe anything he says. He lied in the past about why they went to Iraq. How can we believe anything he says now?”

In Perth, **Luke Richardson**, a TAFE engineering student, said: “I am generally opposed to the IR changes. I have heard a lot of bad stories about AWAs [Australian Workplace Agreements]. They are manipulated to shaft the worker. Big business is always trying to maximise profits by slashing wages and conditions. The end justifies the means. If they can save a few million dollars by sending families into poverty, they don’t care.

“One rally won’t change it. You need a general popular movement, on a continuous basis, that will be targeted and organised in the interests of the people.”



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